

Training to Foster Implicit Communications

Subject Area Training

EWS 2006

Author Captain Prescott Wilson, USMC

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 2006		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2006 to 00-00-2006	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Training to Foster Implicit Communications				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, Marine Corps University, 2076 South Street, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico, VA, 22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 9	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

(On stage at an improvisational comedy show)

Actor A: Augh!

Actor B: Whatever is it, man?

Actor A: It's my leg, doctor.

Actor B: This looks nasty. I shall have to amputate.

Actor A: It's the one you amputated last time, doctor.

Actor B: You mean you've got a pain in your wooden leg?

Actor A: Yes, doctor.

Actor B: You know what this means?

Actor A: Not woodworm, doctor!

Actor B: Yes. We'll have to remove it before it spreads to the rest of you. (A's chair collapses)

*Actor A: My God! It's spreading to the furniture!*¹

The crowd roars with laughter. The quick, clever banter invented by the two actors on stage seems planned, but it is not. The actors are performing a Harold, where each player invents a role for himself and a story unfolds before the audience. Underneath the apparent chaos, though, is a very simple concept that fosters spontaneity: the concept of acceptance. Notice that in the above example, taken from Malcom Gladwell's book, "Blink", neither actor tries to pull the scene in a certain direction. Actor A initiates the situation and even points actor B in a certain direction (being a doctor); actor B decides that his counterpart's leg is made of wood, and so on. The concept of

¹ Malcom Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2005), 116.

acceptance means that no initiative is wrong in improvisation; it must be adjusted to and incorporated into the scene². It is the singular unifying force that gives direction to the actors and allows comedy to evolve in the midst of apparent chaos. More importantly, it fosters unspoken, instantaneous understanding and interaction: the art of implicit communication.

To any military unit dealing with the complexities of today's battlefield, implicit communication, like that used by the comedy troupe, is a powerful tool. It is the very antithesis of micromanagement. Subordinate units, even individuals, are more able to take initiative within the commander's intent, and information flow is expedited up and down the chain of command, often without words.

Unfortunately, due to the nature of the current conflict and accepted personnel staffing practices, many deploying units are unable to truly grow implicit communication. The cost is heavy; it directly correlates to the unit's ability to perform its mission and can be measured in loss of equipment and personnel.

Despite the difficulties of the current wartime requirements, the Marine Corps could better prepare its deploying units by taking simple measures to facilitate the use of implicit communication.

² Malcom Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2005), 116.

A Basic Understanding of the Concept

First, one must grasp implicit communication in very simple terms. One key component, according to a research team at the Australian Defence Force Land Operations Divisions Systems Sciences Laboratory, is a shared mental model³. The authors state that this occurs when "teammates share a common knowledge of the events taking place around them. In this way, shared mental models enable teams to adapt to new and dynamic environments by allowing them to predict the needs of their teammates, thus coordinating their actions"⁴.

With a useful shared mental model as the conduit, inter-team communication becomes increasingly efficient. Team members have this model in the forefront of their minds and truly understand their teammates' needs for information. They begin to realize the value of continually orienting their teammates to their observations and actions. Thus, information is "pushed" instead of "pulled", and overall situational awareness jumps exponentially. Unnecessary words and actions are bypassed for more useful, and hence economical, efforts.

The Marine Corps mentions this concept in Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication-1. A paragraph in chapter four instructs Marines to follow the example of a jazz band and foster

³ Vanessa Mills and Kelly Swain, *Implicit Communication in Novice and Expert Teams* (Land Operations Division Systems Sciences Laboratory, 2002), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

harmonious improvisation along the command structure. But to most readers, the ability of a practiced band to "jam" is a mystery. In fact, it is rather simple. All members of the band need to understand a few key concepts like chord progression, texture, dynamics, song arrangement, and blending. Far from chaotic, it is an audible representation of a very simple social structure where at any given time, one person leads and all others willingly follow simple rules and support with their component. So basic music theory is the shared mental model that allows the band to make music as they go while appearing rehearsed.

Similarly, the comedy troupe mentioned at the beginning displayed implicit communication by using the shared mental model of "acceptance". For the military force, the unifying concept, the shared mental model, is the commander's intent. For an example of a military force successfully growing and employing implicit communication in an almost ideal situation, one can look at the 1st Marine Division at the beginning of the current conflict in Iraq.

The Value of True Unit Cohesion

In preparation for the initial assault from Kuwait towards Baghdad during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) I in 2003, the 5th Marine Regiment had several months to prepare for the coming battle. By October 2002 while still in the continental United

States, the regiment had a thorough understanding of the mission at hand and the implied tasks associated with it. Making the most of that time, the 5th Marine Regimental Commander, General Joe Dunford, instituted standard operating procedures that fostered relationships among his subordinate leaders. In his words, the constant communication up and down the chain of command during that preparation time worked to "eliminate ambiguity before we crossed the line of departure"⁵. The goal was to ensure each subordinate commander and even individual Marines could "image the very challenge they were likely to face"⁶. Gen Dunford, by experience, knew that a shared mental model would be the catalyst for synchronized improvisation once the fight started and the plan was thrown out the window. In fact, what he describes as "investing in the communications bank"⁷ paid great dividends during the ensuing war. In retrospect, Gen Dunford commented that the 5th Marine Regiment's extended workup period created a unique situation that allowed them to be "fundamentally, about as good as it's ever going to be".⁸ The regimental leadership had created an environment conducive to implicit communication, and because of it, Gen Dunford stated that units and individuals "continued to take advantage of opportunities as they presented themselves".⁹

⁵ General Joseph A. Dunford, Personal interview. February 3, 2006.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

In the above case, implicit communication was a critical capability of the fighting force. Its ability to be used stemmed from an able staff and the time necessary to allow cohesion to grow. Without one of the two ingredients, implicit communication could never be exercised and the unit would have like had a much more difficult experience. But, unfortunately, not all deploying units are lucky enough to train under such ideal circumstances.

The 3rd Battalion, 25th Marine Regiment Experience

Major Steve White was assigned to Instructor and Inspector duty for 3rd Battalion, 25th Marines (3/25) from 2002 until the Fall of 2005. During his time with the battalion, eight and a half months were spent as the battalion's Operations Officer in Iraq supporting OIF III-I. Unlike the experience of the 5th Marine Regiment, 3/25 had comparatively little time to build true unit cohesion and establish a useful shared mental model from which implicit communication could grow. Instead, the battalion staff finally mustered in its entirety with all the key personnel on 10 January 2005 and were operating in Iraq less than two months later.¹⁰ Additionally, while in country, they were spread between the towns of Hit and Haditha, approximately 90km apart. On top of this extraordinarily large area of operations was the requirement to deploy nine mobile assault platoons to operate with relative independence. The key ingredients that had caused

¹⁰ Maj Steve White. Personal Interview, February 13, 2006.

5th Marines to succeed, strong cohesive leadership and time to foster relationships, were not present with 3/25. Rather, they had come together just before deployment and were forced to build relationships as they went. But even through almost nine months of overseas operations, Maj White suggests that because of the sheer pace of activity, the battalion "may never have actually had implicit communication".¹¹ Exacerbating the problem, once in country 3/25 had to deal with the additional strain of absorbing a United States Army company into their table of organization.

In personal interviews, the contrast between the 5th Marines extended workup time and 3/25's last-minute assimilation is readily apparent. Gen Dunford speaks almost with nostalgia at the thoroughness of their preparation. He speaks fondly of his subordinate officers and the deep trust that was established between them. It is clear that implicit communication was not only useful but was key to the success of the 5th Marine Regiment. Conversely, Maj White reflects on 3/25's workup with frustration. He is clearly intensely proud of the battalion, but one can sense that the mission was made exponentially more difficult by the circumstances under which they came together.

The Marine Corps can do better than this. The experience of Gen Dunford's regiment should not be the exception to the rule, but in today's environment, it appears to be. Understanding and appreciating implicit communication are the first steps, but now, a solution to the problem must be sought.

¹¹ Maj Steve White. Personal Interview, February 13, 2006.

The Need For a Military Solution

Civilian researchers have long studied implicit communication and stand ready with recommendations for team leaders to build implicit communication skills. By far, the most common advice is cross training. With this concept, a member of a team who normally performs function A temporarily performs function B. Likewise, the normal performer of function B tries his hand at function A. There will be, invariably, an initial loss in productivity. However, when the team members return to their normal duties and are presented with an abnormally difficult problem, they are far better equipped to deal with it as a team because of their recent experiences learning their counterparts' jobs.

Unfortunately, cross training is simply not a feasible course of action for military units. A battalion's successful preparation for war is the goal of the staff; there is too much at stake with the limited time available to take such risks with the unit's nerve center. Ultimately, it is hard enough in the military to learn one's own job, much less someone else's. So, implicit communication can be proactively built as research has shown, but Marine units are in a far different set of circumstances than most teams and therefore must consider alternative methods for achieving the same benefits.

Recommendations

First, a modified form of cross training could be executed at almost every level. As discussed before, there is not time for Marines of various ranks and MOS's to rotate through each other's jobs, but a more useful drill would be to take written quizzes about the jobs of Marines working in the proximity. At the platoon level, machine gunners would study the jobs of the riflemen and perhaps the mortar men. On the battalion level, the intelligence officer would take a relatively thorough quiz over the Adjutant's responsibilities as well as those of the logistics officer. The cost in time to execute cross tests would be relatively small but the benefits enormous.

Second, Headquarters Marine Corps (HQMC) should adopt a more stringent standard for units coming together before deployment. As Maj White's testimony showed, six weeks was just enough for basic familiarization. At a minimum, a goal of four months of uninterrupted time should be sought, especially for Marine Forces Reserve units who have little to no experience with one another beforehand.

Third, active duty officers should be available to fill command and staff billets in the Reserve battalions, not just with I&I staffs. The need for fresh knowledge and experience, especially at the company and battalion command cannot be overstated. Those are simply the wrong billets in which to refresh one's tactical knowledge.

Endstate: A Better Prepared Unit

Marine units will continue to deploy and find themselves in perilous situations. Unit leaders and staff will continue to strive to build teams that will operate as one well-oiled machine in even the most arduous circumstances. But, if the Marine Corps would absorb limited cross training at MOS producing schools, form its deploying reserve units earlier, and staff some of their command billets with active duty officers, they will better prepare these deploying units by setting the framework for their cohesion. Simple measures, taken aggressively and at the highest levels, could mean more Marines returning home safely and the mission in Iraq accomplished sooner.

Word count: 2047

Bibliography

Gladwell, Malcom. *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*. New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2005.

Mills, Vanessa and Kelly Swain. "Implicit Communication in Novice and Expert Teams," *Land Operations Division Systems Sciences Laboratory*, 2002.

Dunford, General Joseph A. Personal interview. February 3, 2006.

White, Major Steven A. Personal interview. February 13, 2006.